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Dec. 3 1999

EPA looking at lingering asbestos risks

By Brent Shrum, Western News Reporter

Evaluating lingering health risks associated with the vermiculite mine once an integral part of Libby's economy will be complicated by the years it takes for asbestos-related illness to show up and the unusual ways some people may have been exposed, according to the head of a federal Environmental Protection Agency team dispatched to the area.

"There's absolutely no question that this town has had some impact, mostly the people who worked at the mine site historically," the EPA's Paul Peronard said during a Wednesday meeting with the county commissioners.

Many former mine workers and family members have fallen victim to respiratory disease caused by exposure to tremolite asbestos, which occurred naturally alongside the vermiculite that was mined for use as insulation. About 100 lawsuits have been filed against W.R. Grace, which operated the mine from 1963 until it was shut down in 1990.

"You're seeing cases now that might have resulted from exposure 20 years ago," Peronard said.

The health problems experienced by miners and their families aren't surprising considering how little was known about the toxic effects of asbestos in years past, Peronard said. Effects have been documented at other mine sites.

What makes Libby a unique case is that some people who never worked at the mine or lived with someone who did are reporting asbestos-related illnesses. Some believe they became ill from playing in piles of asbestos-tainted ore as children, or from using the material in their gardens for drainage.

"Swinging into a pile on a rope swing, this is not a standard occupational exposure that we have a handle on," Peronard said.

Peronard's team tested samples collected at the former Grace export plant near the railroad tracks and at the nearby baseball fields. Trace amounts of asbestos turned up at the export plant while tests at the surface of the ball fields detected no asbestos at all.

"Right now the ball fields look pretty good," Peronard said.

Further testing will be done below the surface to determine whether there is any asbestos there,

Peronard said.

There are some piles of vermiculite left behind at the former processing plant, now Raintree Nursery, but they shouldn't present a problem as long as they are handled properly, Peronard said.

"I look at that site and I don't see a broad public health risk," he said.

The actual mine site on Vermiculite Mountain is "almost a non-issue," Peronard said.

There's no question that tremolite is present, especially in the tailings pile where it was put after being separated from the vermiculite, but it's well-contained, Peronard said. The mine is six miles from town, it's not being disturbed by any human activity, and vegetation is taking hold to prevent erosion, he said.

Asbestos fibers must be stirred up into the air and breathed in to create a health risk. That's not happening at the mine, Peronard said.

"Nobody's driving or walking on the tailings pile," he said. "If someone says they're going to put a subdivision on that mine site, everything changes."

The former railroad loading area across the Kootenai River from Raintree will also be looked at but isn't a top priority, Peronard said. A subdivision is in the works at the site, but no one is living there yet, he explained.

Winds blowing from the mine site toward town aren't a worry, Peronard said. There's a chance that wind-borne asbestos may have been a problem at times when mining was in full swing, but that concern went away when the mine ceased operations. He said mining got cleaner as the years went by; air samples taken at the site in the 1980s showed much lower concentrations of asbestos than samples taken two decades before.

"I see gardens and homes as the more likely place where current exposures are going to be happening if they are happening," Peronard said.

The EPA team plans to begin testing residences next week. The first priority will be the homes of people suffering from asbestos-related health problems who never worked at the mine or had family members who did. Indoor air samples will be taken where asbestos-tainted insulation may have been used.

"This is actually the time of year that exposure would be the worst from that scenario," Peronard said.

The plan is to test an initial 20 or 30 homes before Christmas, then proceed based on the test results. Peronard said 200 or 300 homes will probably be checked out by the time the testing is over.

Peronard added that there has never been a documented case of asbestosis resulting from having asbestos in attic insulation. Health problems have generally been confined to people who have worked with asbestos on a daily basis, with the risk proportional to the length and concentration of exposure.

The simple presence of asbestos-containing materials isn't a major concern in itself, Peronard said. An example of where it could be a problem would be a home where the insulation is leaking through a ceiling and being stirred up by a fan, he said.

After evaluating possible asbestos contamination at individual residences, the EPA plans to begin broader screening of the area, including a look at whether ambient air samples from around Libby contain asbestos.

"After looking at the lay of the land I don't think that's going to be the case," Peronard said. "I don't think you have to worry about rolling up your windows or holding your breath as you drive through town."

Costs of the testing and any resulting cleanup will be borne by the EPA in some combination with the state and W.R. Grace, said John Wardell, director of the EPA's Helena office. A budget hasn't yet been developed, he said.

"We're in that circumstance of accumulating costs and not knowing where the end point is,"

Wardell said.

Peronard estimated the cost of initial testing at \$500,000. The amount ultimately spent, along with the time the agency spends in Libby, could increase depending on the test results.

The focus of the EPA's investigation may change as data is collected, Peronard said.

"If we start finding lots and lots of tremolite and we end up screening 6,700 homes in the Lincoln County area, well I'll probably buy one and we'll be here much longer," he said.

Libby residents voice concerns at hearing

Libby residents voiced their concerns about the possibility that the former W.R. Grace vermiculite mine might still pose health hazards at a public hearing Wednesday evening in Memorial Gym.

The hearing attracted about 500 area residents. It was initially scheduled by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality to gather public input on the requested release of a \$67,000 reclamation bond for the former mine site now owned by Kootenai Development Company. An initial bond of \$472,000 was issued after the mine shut down in 1990, but the bulk of the money was released following the completion of most of the reclamation work in 1994.

The scope of the hearing was expanded to cover other issues associated with the mine after recent news reports raised awareness of widespread health problems resulting from exposure to tremolite asbestos, which occurs naturally alongside the vermiculite at Zonolite Mountain.

"A very small portion of asbestos in the ore can result in a significant amount of asbestos in the air," said Kalispell attorney Roger Sullivan, whose firm has represented a number of local residents in suits against Grace.

Sullivan showed slides of the mine site while it was still operational as well as pictures taken this fall. He questioned whether the reclamation work has been adequate.

"The open question is whether there continues to be a health hazard," Sullivan said.

It's important that further testing take place to provide an answer, Sullivan said.

"Nobody will be happier than my clients if these tests turn up negative and Libby is given a clean bill of health," he said.

Bonnie Gestring of the Montana Environmental Information Center was also skeptical of the reclamation done at the site. She said the work doesn't meet state standards, which required the reclaimed area to match the surrounding countryside in utility and stability, and suggested that the entire site should have been covered with topsoil to allow vegetation to better take hold.

Gayla Benefield, who lost both parents to asbestos-related lung disease, said she was "shocked" when she visited the site last fall.

"It did not match everything else," she said. "It was nothing but a great big tailings pile going into the water."

Benefield said her family has been hit hard by asbestos exposure. An aunt and an uncle also have asbestosis, she said.

"We always said 'the dust that killed dad, the dust that killed mother,'" Benefield said. "We weren't smart enough then to know what was in the dust."

Benefield expressed concern for future generations.

"I don't want to see my grandchildren in 20 years go through what some of these people had to go through," she said.

Norita Skramstad called asbestosis "a death sentence."

"The children we have here now, we have no idea if they have it or not," she said. "Only time will tell."

Louise Kaeding said the issue has been raised for the good of Libby.

"I love Libby and I want to see my kids and grandkids grow up healthy here too, so let's clean it

up," she said.

Pat Vinion, whose father worked at the mine and died as a result, also has asbestosis.

"When I started getting sick when I was younger, they said, 'It's not possible, you never worked there, you can't get it, it's not possible,'" Vinion said. "Well, it is possible. I'm dying of it."

Terry Smith said he lost both parents to asbestos exposure. He and his brother suffer from asbestosis as well, he said.

An uncle was diagnosed with emphysema but an autopsy revealed asbestosis, Smith said. It takes a specialist who knows about asbestos to make an accurate diagnosis, he said.

Smith argued against the release of the reclamation bond.

"If they get this reclamation bond back, they're going to be building houses up there, they're going to be building roads, they're going to be digging up the ground," he said. "I don't think they should ever be allowed to build up there."

No one knew of the dangers when the mining started, said Smith, who worked there for three years.

"I don't think the people of this town would have let that mine go in if they knew it was going to kill most of us," he said.

County considers legal action against FVCC

By Ray Stout, Western News Reporter

Years of unaccounted-for, budgets, revenues and expenditures for Lincoln County Campus have prompted the county commissioners to consider legal action against its parent institution in Kalispell.

Since mid 1994, the college has not received beginning balances, revenue and expenditure accounting, or monthly or yearly ending balances from Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell, the LCC Service Region Board told the commissioners Wednesday.

Reached at his home, FVCC chairman John Engebretson said he hadn't seen any information related to the matter and couldn't comment.

"I wouldn't have any comment on it until I'd read the whole thing and talked with the (Flathead Valley) board about it," Engebretson said.

FVCC President David Beyer said it would be "premature" to comment without seeing information directly from the commissioners.

At the meeting, the commission voted to retain legal counsel for possible action against both the Kalispell college and the Board of Regents.

The Regents would be named because "they are the ones who are the overseers of the community colleges," said Sandy Wagner, chair of the LCC Service Region Board.

However, Commissioner of Higher Education Richard Crofts said that with community colleges – unlike with the university system – the Regents don't manage the institutions. They only approve the budgets and programs.

"We're not quite sure why the Regents would be named in the suit if they file a suit," said Crofts.

Added the Regents' attorney, Leroy Schramm, "It seems to me their complaint is more aimed at the campus level."

At any rate, says the LCC board, about \$100,000 per year of "anticipated, forecasted and actual revenue" has not shown up as expenses at Lincoln County Campus.

"What the (Lincoln County) college is doing now is collecting taxes and sending it into Flathead Valley and getting nothing in return," said Wayne Lersbak, vice chairman of the Service Region Board.